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East Timor Towards Self-Determination: The Social and Cultural Questions

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FOR THE RECORD: THE CASE FOR A NATIONAL ARCHIVAL CENTRE IN EAST TIMOR

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In his novel 'Schindler's Ark', which tells the story of Oskar Schindler the German industrialist who risked his life to save the beleaguered Jews in Nazi-occupied Poland, Thomas Keneally says of Bosko:

'His responsibility was the perimeter of the ghetto and from his office beyond the walls he looked inwards at the Aktion with a precise horror; for he, like Oskar, considered himself a potential witness'.

In view of its timing and its theme, this Conference is an excellent occasion to ask a fundamental question: who in post-Suharto East Timor will collect, organise and preserve the work of the 'witnesses' who have looked inwards at the Aktion in East Timor 'with precise horror' over the last 25 years?

There is an exciting and profoundly important project here for an enterprising East Timorese NGO or institution. Scattered all over the world - on bookshelves, in boxes, filing cabinets, drawers, media libraries, back sheds, university collections, photo albums, personal collections, dog-eared folders and the like - can be found East Timor's historical memory. For the purposes of this short paper, I have mind primarily pre-computer records or hard copy in various forms covering the period 1974 to the early 90s, which are in the possession of or known to non-Timorese 'witnesses'. Some have been meticulously kept with an eye to the future. Others have been pushed to one side in the imperative to get on with the work. All risk disrepair and decay as the years proceed and are in danger of being lost as a new chapter for East Timor unfolds and events move on. The project is to locate these records, to collect and preserve them in one place, and to organise them to ensure their accessibility to current and future generations of East Timorese.

To play with the title of Keneally's novel, one envisages the establishment of a 'Timor Ark' in Dili, which, like Noah's biblical ark, can serve as the repository of what has been salvaged from a time of great tragedy and near extinction. This Ark might occupy a treasured place in the library system for East Timor envisaged by Ceu Brites and Bernardino Siry in their visionary paper 'A Library System for East Timor' prepared for the East Timor Strategic Development Planning Conference held in Melbourne in April this year.

Four steps

What are the steps in establishing such an archival project? There are at least four initial steps to consider.

Step one is the establishment of a Timorese task force with the professional skills required for this work. This task force should work in the national interest, inspire professional confidence in those in possession of material (not least those likely to be affected by the surrender of material), be politically independent and be able to secure sufficient funding for the task. No doubt the required skills can be obtained through training and skilled non-Timorese of goodwill can be approached to assist with the project, country by country.

Step two will be to identify what is being sought or the form in which the historical material exists. Mediums include audio tapes (e.g. Fretilin radio messages from 1975-6, radio interviews with key players - some of them now dead or in advanced years), newspaper clippings, slides and film, photos (including East Timorese who suffered human rights abuse), speeches, court testimony, handwritten letters (situation reports smuggled out of East Timor, personal letters in family collections), other print material and books.

It is important that material is collected and stored on a non-partisan, objective basis. The temptation to present in a triumphal way or to repress potentially embarrassing material should be resisted. This will require the task force to be strictly professional and neutral in the conduct of its work.

Step three will be to identify key individuals and organisations known to have collected material and to seek their cooperation. As already noted, I am thinking primarily of the non-Timorese 'witnesses' in making this proposal, as it is their witness which is most in danger of being lost. It is taken for granted that a national archive in East Timor must include the documented experience and records of the East Timorese people themselves, both in East Timor and the diaspora. Other documentation is essentially complementary to this central experience. One thinks of the resources in the possession of East Timorese political and community leaders, NGOs, organisations such as the political parties and the Church, and Timorese researchers in a number of locations.

Turning to the 'witnesses', in Australia one thinks immediately of people like Jim Dunn, Kevin Sherlock, John Waddingham, Rob Wesley-Smith, Jenny Herrera (responsible for Michelle Turner's collection), Helen Hill, David Scott, Denis Freney's estate, and the ACFOA Human Rights Office in Melbourne. One's mind then turns to the many solidarity groups, activists and NGOs, not to mention media organisations and the like who have maintained records for activist or research purposes, including organisations such as the National Civic Council whose current director stated on ABC radio recently that access to NCC records would be permitted to bona fide researchers. Hansard, the Parliamentary Legislative Research Service, and belatedly the Department of Foreign Affairs are also important sources. In Portugal, one would quickly turn to the Timorese political parties Fretilin and UDT, the Espaco por Timor, CDPM, Jill Jolliffe, Professor Barbedo de Magalhaes, and the Portuguese Government. Elsewhere overseas, NGOs like Tapol and Amnesty International in London, Arnold Kohen and Sidney Jones in the US, CIIR in London and activists in Japan - to mention only some that come to mind from the earlier period - are also obvious candidates. One should also add an Indonesia component not least from the less well known earlier period of Indonesia's occupation of East Timor. Interesting sources here include agencies in the Catholic and Protestant churches, the Vatican Nunciature in Jakarta, the International Committee of the Red Cross and Catholic Relief Services (US).

A brief digression will serve to underline the point being made. The ACFOA Human Rights Office in Melbourne houses an extensive, perhaps unique, collection of East Timor material from 1974 on. This material covers the gamut of issues - human rights, family reunions, church, aid issues etc and an extensive collection of correspondence and communications in the form of audio tapes, graphic material, notebooks, press clippings, books and the like. It exists in numerous boxes, several crammed filing cabinets, dozens of lever arch files, pamphlet boxes, shelves. Some of it has been plundered by researchers never to be seen again. Some is damaged due to poor filing. It is regularly moved to make room for other material and has spilled into the passage way. In other words, a unique collection built up by meticulous researchers over 25 years is in danger of slowly being lost to East Timor's heritage.

Step four will be the conduct of an audit or stocktake. A reasonably comprehensive stock taking will be necessary to guide the task force in its recommendations on what sort and size of depository will be needed in East Timor to house the assembled material.

Further steps, such as the best way to mount, preserve and organise material for conditions and use in East Timor will require professional and technical assistance.

Another important challenge for the task force will be to identify the gaps in the record and try to fill them. There are many, especially on the Indonesian side including the personal accounts of ordinary Indonesian soldiers which are yet to be told, not to mention the secrets locked away in the files of ABRI, Kopkamtib, Bais and maybe KomnasHAM. The great famine of 1978-9, which accounted for most of the deaths in East Timor under Indonesia, is poorly documented. The day to day lives, survival strategies, and guerilla experiences of the armed resistance also constitute a significant gap in the record. A difficult period is the 1975 civil war. As Zacarias da Costa noted in his thoughtful paper on reconciliation and development presented to the Strategic Development Planning Conference in Melbourne last April, the civil war 'has been forced into the recess of memory in the interest of national unity and in the interest of presenting a united front against a foreign aggressor'. A further task is to fill out the record through the careful debriefing of those key actors willing to go on the record.

Identity and history

Why preserve the past? Why go to considerable lengths and cost to collect material and house it in a central collection for future generations of East Timorese? Will this not simply perpetuate division and animosity, not least hatred of Indonesia, at a time when East Timorese should engage in reconciliation and look to the future? Would it not be more responsible to collect all this data and burn the lot in a huge pyre of expiation and regeneration?
These are difficult and important questions. Certainly the task force charged with undertaking this archival project should not in any way be motivated by political considerations or revenge.

My personal attitude on this issue has been influenced by Australia's current struggle with its 'black' past as we seek to engage with indigenous Australians in reconciliation. Some - including the Prime Minister Mr Howard who popularised the term 'black armband history' - prefer not to dwell on the past. Advocates of

reconciliation in Australia, and elsewhere such as South Africa and Guatemala, argue persuasively, however, that reconciliation means respect for rights and respect for history. This requires facing the reality of abuse, not to make everybody feel bad but because the past is never fully gone but stays to shape what we are and what we do - for better or for worse. The alternative is denialism or avoiding the truth by suppressing, sanitising, denying or perverting reality.

I believe my children, taught as they are about the reality of Aboriginal history, have a healthier and more engaged attitude towards black Australians than people of my generation for whom this was a non-issue. Indonesians are wrestling with this issue as well. Ibu Salami, a political prisoner for 20 years under Suharto, told Asia-Pacific's Peter Mares recently that she had decided to document her and other tapol's experience and identify the perpetrators of their abuse because it was critical to Indonesia becoming 'a civilised society'. Dr Alex Bouraine of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission also believes that, though painful, risky and arduous, the truth is essential to a restoration of moral order because ultimately reconciliation is about rediscovery of 'the soul of society'.

In his thoughtful paper referred to earlier, Zacarias da Costa added a further consideration in favour of this approach, namely sustainable development. 'A people centred development plan has to take into consideration the psycho-social realities of the people it is designed to serve and involve'.

Reconciliation must not be confused with resignation, nor forgiving with forgetting. East Timor's modern history and identity have been indelibly shaped by the experience of the last 25 years. The archival testimony of that struggle should be returned to the people of East Timor as their rightful property. Where it is negative, it will serve as a healthy corrective. Where positive, it will strengthen, sustain and inspire in the years to come.

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